



Sources and Component Parts of Marxism

We have said, while discussing Machiavelli, that communism does not discard the past, but grows out of it. This week the main item is Lenin's "[Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism](#)" (download linked below). This piece of writing, though extremely short, manages to embrace the whole of philosophy, politics and economics. For these reasons it is highly popular with teachers and students.

Lenin's purpose is to show how comprehensive Marxism is, and that Marxism is on the "highroad of development of world civilisation".

He puts the matter like this:

"...there is nothing resembling "sectarianism" in Marxism, in the sense of its being a hidebound, petrified

doctrine, a doctrine which arose away from the highroad of development of world civilisation. On the contrary, the genius of Marx consists precisely in the fact that he furnished answers to questions which had already engrossed the foremost minds of humanity. His teachings arose as a direct and immediate continuation of the teachings of the greatest representatives of philosophy, political economy and socialism.”

One may appreciate Lenin’s point, without necessarily accepting every simplicity in this highly compressed account. It is a scheme of understanding, almost like a diagram. It raises many questions, for example:

- Is there any such thing as “Marxism”, in the sense described here by Lenin as “complete and harmonious” and “an integral world conception”? Karl Marx did not think so. From his own point of view, Marx had only completed a small part of what lay before him; and he refused the label “Marxist”.
- In what sense was Marx’s philosophy materialist? Did Marx see human beings first and foremost as arrangements of molecules – i.e. as an “extension” of material? Or is the actual point of Marx’s philosophy and politics to give the free human subject priority over the material, objective world in which it must toil for its development? Scholars still debate these questions.
- In what sense did Marx have an economic doctrine, or an economic theory? It is true that the question of surplus value is at the core of Marx’s Capital, Volume 1. But is

that work therefore an economic text-book? Or is it really what Marx called it: A Critique of Political Economy? In other words, is it not anti-economics, rather than economics?

When it comes to politics, there is no doubt about “*the struggle of classes as the basis and the motive force of the whole development*”, as Lenin puts it. So there is a lot that is good in the “Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism”. But it is only a start and it does not absolve anyone from the necessity of further study.

It is pleasing that in this short, packed piece Lenin still has time to mention South Africa (in his last paragraph), and that news of proletarian organisation in our country had already reached Lenin over a century ago, in 1913.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [3 Sources and 3 Component parts of Marxism, Lenin, 1913.](#)
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